

Hegel in France

Hegel's vitality in France, aside from the fact that it is a recent phenomenon, follows a singular trajectory, which to this day has only obscured both its relation to Marxism and a renewed detachment of the rational kernel of the dialectic.

In our eyes, it is to Alexandre Kojève's seminar in the 1930s that we ought to date back a certain non-academic inscription of the Hegelian reference in the ideological concerns of the time. From this moment onward, a figure of Hegel is sketched out from which it will take us more than thirty years to extricate ourselves – and even then, the game is far from being over.

Kojève's Hegel is exclusively the one of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, seized in the idealism of the scissions of self-consciousness, captured in the ascending metaphor that leads from immediate sense-certainty to absolute knowledge with, at its heart, the dialectic of lord and bondsman. The formalism of the confrontation with the Other has the poetic virtue of standing under the sign of risk and death: this Hegel will find an audience with the revolutionary romanticism of Malraux and, even more so, among the surrealists. Bataille and Breton will state all their debts to Kojève.

With the solid support of Jean Hippolyte's translations and essays, this unilateral figure reaches its massive promotion after the War, in the person of Sartre. The pessimist doctrine of the for-the-other (hell is the others) finds nourishment here. On the side of

psychoanalysis, Lacan himself, further supported by his surrealist friendships, finds in his first texts a way to develop his doctrine of the imaginary: narcissism and aggressiveness are strictly symmetrical to lord and bondsman.

In short: surrealists and existentialists find in Hegel the wherewithal to forge a tense romanticist idealism, which places the affective subject back at the heart of the experience of the world, and which can be measured in its pathos against the backdrop of the terrible historical uproar provoked everywhere by the effects of the Bolshevik revolution. With regard to the forms of consciousness that October 1917, the crisis, fascism, and the two World Wars remodelled as in a storm, the young Hegel – the man who drew up the balance sheet of 1789 and the Napoleonic wars – served as siege-engine against the dusty positivism of the national academy, against the sinister humdrum of French post-Kantians, against the secular humanism of the ‘thinkers’ of the radical party.

Hegel in France was first and foremost the struggle of tragic idealism against scientific idealism. In this sense, his irruption bears witness to the time in a masked way and, in the most profound depths of subjective ideals, substitutes the twin figure of the cursed writer and the professional revolutionary of the Third International – violent and secretive men from all over the world – for the slightly sub-prefectoral good-heartedness of the decorated member of the Institute.

On this terrain, the encounter with Marxism was unavoidable at the same time as it was impossible. Subjectively, the Hegelians of the moment placed their bet on the revolution and hated the bourgeois order. Breton and Sartre both had to come to this necessary crossing: becoming fellow travellers of the communists. But, being the bearers of romantic individualism no less so than Malraux, they could not withstand to the end all the mental consequences of this fellow-travelling. In the exemplary case of Sartre – which moreover came at the time of great ambivalence regarding the proletarian nature of the party – this contradictory situation gave way to a

gigantic enterprise for which, on the other hand, he had had a number of recurrent predecessors, most notably in Germany: to force Marxism into subjective idealism. Hegel returned this time – by a reversal of the Marxist reversal – as an apparatus to put dialectical materialism back on its head. Such is the whole history of this Hegelianized Marxism, whose central category is that of alienation and whose fate revolves around a key text of the young Marx: the *Manuscripts of 1844*. Here too, Kojève's lesson was not lost on anyone, since it underscored, as the outcome of the dialectic of lord and bondsman, the generation of the category of Work – that focal point with which to solder together (if only apparently) the Marxist political economy and the avatars of self-consciousness.

In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* – but after the young Lukács, after Korsch – Sartre hailed Marxism as the unsurpassable horizon of our culture and, in a single movement, undertook to dismantle this Marxism by forcing it to realign itself with the original idea that is most foreign to it: the transparency of the cogito. And such was, in fact – outside of the narrow circle of party intellectuals, who stuck to a scientism in the style of Jules Guesde⁵ – the only available Marx on the French market, and at the same time the only Hegel.

Both this Marx and this Hegel are equally false, the first for being reduced to the second, and the second for being separated from that part of himself that precisely cleared the path for the first: *The Science of Logic*.

The counter-current took shape as soon as the historical horizon changed at its base. Once the cycle of the effects of the Second World War was over, once the revolutionary public of Soviet Russia implacably came undone, the PCF was clearly committed to bourgeois and chauvinistic revisionism (the experience of the war of Algeria was decisive in this matter), and proletarian rigor was on

5 *Translator's Note:* Jules Guesde (1845–1922) was an important French socialist intellectual, instrumental in the formation of the Parti Ouvrier and the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière.

the rise in China, with every single person being summoned to take a stance on the wars of national liberation, the intellectuals had to invent another playground and organize different ideals for themselves. The 'fellow traveller' died of starvation. With him the guarantees of the philosophies of consciousness ceased to have purchase, since their role had been to preserve, with regard to a fascinating revolution, the double rapport of commitment and the for-oneself.

Solitary for a moment, the intellectuals were forced to identify themselves as such and to redefine their relation to Marxism on the basis of this re-identification. The first task produced that absolute valorization of knowledge and the intellect known as structuralism. The second, by a violent turnabout, made of Marx, instead of a metaphysician of the Other and of Work, a scholar of social structures. In both cases, there was a noisy break with Hegel.

As is well known, it is Althusser who concentrated the attack on the idealized Marxism of the previous period, who discredited the young Marx of the *Manuscripts of 1844*, and who made of Hegel the absolute foil, up to the point of stating the thesis of a radical discontinuity between Hegel and Marx as the vantage point from which everything becomes clear.

This cleanup project had positive effects in its time (1963–1966), supported from afar by the assaults of the Chinese against modern revisionism, in the doctrinal form these assaults took at the time. Althusser restored a kind of brutal trenchancy to Marxism, isolating it from the subjectivist tradition and putting it back in the saddle as positive knowledge. At the same time, Marx and Hegel, even though in opposite terms, found themselves no less foreclosed than in the previous moment. The latter insofar as his unilateral figure, taken as target, by the same token finds itself vindicated: the materialist Hegel of the *Greater Logic* is equally mute for Althusser and for Sartre. And the former insofar as, once adapted to the concepts of structuralism, he gained in scientificity what he lost in terms of class historicity. The Hegelianized Marx of the 1950s was a

speculative, but virtually revolutionary figure. The anti-Hegelian Marx of the 1960s was a savant, but one devoted to the seminar rooms. Or, to give the alternative a concentrated philosophical form: Marx-Hegel was the idealist dialectic; the anti-Hegelian Marx was metaphysical materialism.

What the Cultural Revolution and May 1968 made clear on a massive scale was the need for something entirely different from an oscillation of national intellectual traditions (between the Descartes of the cogito: Sartre; and the Descartes of the machines: Althusser), in order to reinvest Marxism in the real revolutionary movement. Put to the test by the storm, Althusser's positivist Marx was found to be even more threatening, due to its connections with the 'scientific and technical revolution' of the PCF, than was Sartre's idealist Marx. This became visible in the choices they made in times of urgency: Althusser on the side of Waldeck Rochet,⁶ when push came to shove; and Sartre with the 'Maos', in spite of everything.

In France today it is no doubt necessary to establish what Lenin in 1922 (and in reference to Trotsky's mistakes about trade unionism...) wished to call for: a kind of 'Society of Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics', to which he assigned nothing less than the task of generating a 'propaganda of Hegelian dialectics'.⁷

The fact of urgency becomes clear when we look at how the joyous 'new philosophers', with André Glucksmann at the helm, attempt to *come full circle*.⁸

During the first half of the twentieth century, Hegel had served as the idealist mediation to acclimate a certain Marx to the needs of our intelligentsia. Then came the revenge of the all-powerful

6 *Translator's Note*: As late as 1974, Althusser dedicated his *Elements of Self-Criticism* to Waldeck Rochet, who between 1964 and 1972 had been General Secretary of the French Communist Party.

7 V.I. Lenin, 'On the Significance of Militant Materialism', *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress, 1972), vol. 33, pp. 227–36.

8 *Translator's Note*: See André Glucksmann, *The Master Thinkers*, trans. Brian Pearce (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

scientistic tradition: it was the apolitical Marx of the doctors in philosophy who held the podium, while Hegel disappeared behind the bitter curtains.

The Maoist aim is to break with this alternation, with this avoidance. Now, what do we see? The new philosophers come and bandy about Hegelianism as a spectre, as the rational monster of the State. Because of the avowed hatred of the dialectic, this brings them closer to Althusser, were it not for the fact that the latter sought to draw from this shadow-play some more light to shed on Marx, whereas the former aim to shove Marx and Hegel, once more made identical, into the same sombre bag of master thinkers who are at the origin of all Evil.

Thus, against the grain of the process started in the 1930s, this time it is in order to de-acclimate ourselves from Marxism, and in order to have us confess its horror, that once more that sphinx of our central philosophical tradition of thought is manipulated: the maintaining and the splitting of the dialectic between Hegel and Marx.

In truth, everything must be taken up again from scratch so as at last to see that, philosophically, Marx is neither the Other of Hegel nor his Same. Marx is the *divider* of Hegel. He assigns simultaneously the latter's irreversible validity (the rational kernel of the dialectic) and his integral falsity (the idealist system).

Hegel remains the stake of an interminable conflict, because the belaboured understanding of his division alone is what prohibits, in thinking the relationship Marx/Hegel, both the idealist-romantic deviation and the scientistic-academic deviation, as well as, finally, the pure and simple hatred of Marxism.

To restore Hegel in his division is not a vain enterprise, for it is always under the banner of his exclusion, or of his totality, that the bourgeois philosophies of assault proceed – those that propose for themselves not to ignore Marxism, but to invest and neutralize it.

Still, all this requires that we give back a voice to the Hegel who has been gagged – the essential Hegel, the one so feverishly

annotated by Lenin, the one whose knowledge was required, as Marx declared, for understanding *Capital*: the Hegel of the *Science of Logic*.

We try, we begin.